

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DEITY OF YESHUA

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Chair of the Hashivenu Board Ecclesiological Significance

As Messianic Jews, we identify in various ways and degrees with both the Jewish people and with the Christian Church. This dual identification places the issue of the deity of Yeshua front and center for us as a community.

For most of those who identify themselves as Christians the results of the fourth and fifth century Church councils define the substance of their faith, even if they have never heard of Nicaea or Chalcedon and even if they consider the Bible their only doctrinal authority. Affirmation of the deity of Yeshua—and, for many, acknowledgement of the doctrine of the Trinity—constitutes both the center of their confession and the boundary that demarcates its unique character.

On the other hand, the denial of Yeshua's deity has been almost as significant for classic forms of Judaism as its affirmation has been for the Christian faith. Until the Middle Ages, acknowledgement of Yeshua's deity and worship of the Trinitarian God were considered by Jewish authorities to be *avodah zara*, i.e., idolatry. Eventually this assessment changed in regards to Gentile Christians, but not in regards to Jews who believe in Yeshua.

Jews and Christians thus have agreed on the central importance of the doctrine of Yeshua's deity. The doctrine functioned for many centuries of Jews and Christians as a mutually accepted litmus test for distinguishing authentic Judaism from authentic Christianity. It provided a doctrinal correlate to the practical issue of Torah observance, drawing an unambiguous theological line between the two feuding religious communities just as the Jewish imperative and

observance (or Christian prohibition and non-observance) of circumcision, Shabbat, holidays, and *kashrut* established a clear boundary on the level of praxis. For the Jewish people, the chief community-defining positive commandment was “You shall observe the Torah” and the chief negative commandment was “You shall not believe that Jesus is the Son of God.” For the Christian Church, the chief community-defining positive commandment was “You shall believe that Jesus is the Son of God” and the chief negative commandment was “You shall not observe the Torah.”

The drawing and fortification of these two negative boundary lines make life difficult for Messianic Jews. We are pressed from the Christian side to give up or dilute the conviction that Torah observance is incumbent on every Jew, and are pressed even more vehemently from the Jewish side to give up or dilute the conviction that Yeshua is more than a man. Recognizing the parallel between these two issues—Torah observance and the deity of Yeshua—clarifies the immense ecclesiological significance of the doctrinal question we are discussing at this symposium.

## Nicene Orthodoxy

However, the theological and spiritual significance of this question is even greater than its ecclesiological import. In order to discern what is at stake, let us look briefly at Nicene orthodoxy, as exemplified in the Nicene Creed.

Nicene orthodoxy arises as a response to and rejection of Arianism. The Arians believed that the Son of God was a creature. They accepted the biblical teaching that he existed before becoming incarnate and that the world was made through him, but they held that “there was [a time] when He [i.e., the Son of God] was not.” If all reality may be classified as either eternal and uncreated or temporal (i.e., with a beginning in time) and created, the Arians place the pre-incarnate Son of God in the “temporal and created” category. He is the first created entity, the highest of the angels, the most exalted being in all creation. But he is not eternal, and he is not truly divine.

The Arian position reflected the Hellenistic philosophical assumptions dominant in the period. According to those assumptions, the eternal realm of divinity was absolutely transcendent, and could have no direct point of contact with the temporal and material world. Such a system of thought excluded divine incarnation in principle. But

its implications went far beyond the exclusion of incarnation. In effect, it suggested that the transcendent God was ultimately unknowable, and could not be truly present within the created order. *Such a system of thought excluded in principle the living God of Scripture, the self-revealing One who enters into an intimate covenantal relationship with the people of Israel.* In rejecting Arianism, the Nicene Creed took a stand *against* the common philosophical notions of the day, and *for* the biblical portrayal of the God of Israel

What does Nicene Orthodoxy affirm in opposition to the Arian position? At the heart of the Nicene Creed is the confession, rooted in the teaching of the *Besorah* of John, that Yeshua is “the only begotten (*monogene*) Son of God, begotten (*gennethenta*) of his Father before all worlds.”

The Creed draws two conclusions from this fundamental proposition. These two conclusions are conveyed in the phrases, “Light from (*ek*) Light, true God from (*ek*) true God.” First of all, the Son draws his being from (*ek*) the Father. Their relationship has a *taxis*, a structure or form, in which the Father is the ultimate source of the Son’s existence and nature. That structure is eternal rather than temporal: as a star never exists without emitting light, so the Father never exists without the Son. Secondly, the Son shares the Father’s nature. As the Father is “Light,” so the Son is “Light”; as the Father is “true God,” so the Son is “true God.” Though the Son is ordered after and in relationship to the Father, he is not a demigod, a secondary divinity at a lower level of being from the Father.

The Creed continues by describing the Son as “begotten, not made.” This contrast between begetting and making is crucial for the teaching of the Creed. The Son is not like a painting or a sculpture that springs from the genius of an artist but remains fundamentally different in kind from the artist himself. Just as offspring in the temporal created order are the same kind of beings as the ones who generate them, so in the eternal uncreated order the Son is as much divine as is the Father from whom he derives his being.

The contrast between “begetting” and “making” helps explain the most famous phrase of the Creed, “having the same *ousia* (*homoousion*) as the Father.” In this context *ousia* appears to mean the kind of thing that something is. Thus, the *homousion* does not add anything new to what has already been presented in the Creed. It does not provide an explanation or theory for how this could all be so.

Instead, it expresses through one technical Greek term what the Creed states elsewhere in more allusive biblical language.

The Nicene Creed offers a highly plausible rendering of the Apostolic teaching on the divinity of Yeshua, in light of controversies that had emerged in the early centuries of the Yeshua movement. Though it spoke in the language of its own time and place, it did not conform to the philosophical theories that were currently in fashion. Instead, the Creed upheld a commitment to an authentic encounter with the Living God who acts in a revelatory and redemptive manner within the world. It maintained the Jewish and biblical witness to the qualitative difference between the transcendent Creator and that which is created, the particular personal character of the Creator as the God of Israel, and the reality of this God's activity within the created order. It affirmed that God can be known and encountered in the person of Yeshua the Messiah.

## **Medieval Jewish Parallels to the Arian Controversy**

Jewish history provides us with a surprising parallel to the Arian controversy and the Nicene response. The similarity supports our contention that what is at stake at Nicaea is not merely an orthodox Christology, but the authenticity of human encounter with the redemptive self-revealing God of Israel.

Rabbinic texts usually treat the biblical accounts of God's self-revealing presence in a realistic fashion. The Sages are not embarrassed by biblical anthropomorphism. They assume that the figure, who appeared to Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and to all of Israel at the Sea and at Sinai, was none other than *Hashem*, the God of Israel. As part of their broader assault on rabbinic authority, the 9<sup>th</sup> century Karaites, influenced by Greek philosophical currents absorbed into Islamic thought, attacked the anthropomorphism of the rabbinic texts. To ward off these attacks, Saadia Gaon drew upon the same philosophy that guided the Karaites. He reinterpreted rabbinic thought in a way that eliminated all anthropomorphism, even from the biblical theophanies.

But how is it possible to put such [non-anthropomorphic] constructions on these anthropomorphic expressions and on what is related to them, when Scripture itself explicitly mentions a form like that of human beings that was seen by the prophets and spoke to them . . . let alone the description by it of God's being seated on a

throne, and His being borne by the angels on top of a firmament (Ezek. 1:26). . . . Our answer to this objection is that this form was something [specially] created.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, Saadia treats realistically the biblical theophanies. He does not doubt that Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel truly saw an enthroned human figure, referred to in the text as *Hashem*. He also does not doubt that such a figure possessed objective existence beyond the imagination of the prophet. On the other hand, his philosophical commitment to absolute divine transcendence—which he understands as a necessary corollary of the divine unity—excludes the possibility that this enthroned human figure can in fact be the eternal uncreated One. Therefore, he concludes that the form seen by the prophets—the *Kavod* (Glory) or *Shekhinah*—must be a created entity, more exalted than the angels, but not divine.

As Gershom Scholem notes, Saadia’s interpretation became “a basic tenet of the [Jewish] philosophical exegesis of the Bible.” Scholem also points out its radical novelty.

These respected authors could hardly have ignored the fact that this conception of the *Shekhinah* as a being completely separate from God was entirely alien to the talmudic texts, and could only be made compatible with them by means of extremely forced interpretation of these texts. Nevertheless, these philosophers preferred ‘cutting the Gordian knot’ in this way rather than endanger the purity of monotheistic belief by recognizing an uncreated hypostasis.<sup>2</sup>

The parallel here to the Arian interpretation of the *Logos* should be evident. The underlying concerns are identical: a desire to guard the purity of divine transcendence and unity understood in terms of Greek philosophical conceptions. The problems encountered as a result of this concern are likewise identical: the realistic biblical presentation of God’s self-revelation to Israel. Finally, the strategies adopted to overcome the problems are the same: the thesis that the One who is called by the divine Name and who apparently manifests the divine Presence is a created entity, distinct from God and at a lower level in the hierarchy of being.

Just as the Jewish philosophical reinterpretation of the *Kavod/Shekhinah* parallels the Arian reinterpretation of the *Logos*, so

the kabalistic response to the Jewish philosophers parallels the Nicene response to the Arians. Like the Nicene fathers, those who championed the tradition of the *Zohar* agreed with their opponents on the ineffable and transcendent nature of God. These Jewish mystics employed the term *Ein Sof* (i.e., the Infinite One) to refer to this aspect of the divine reality. However, also like the Nicene fathers, the kabbalists viewed the self-revelation of God (the biblical *Kavod*, whom they referred to as the *Sefirot*) as both distinct from and one with *Ein Sof*. The infinite and transcendent nature of God required the distinction, but the objective reality and truthfulness of divine revelation required the unity. If the *Kavod* revealed to Israel is not truly and fully divine, then God remains unknown to the world, and Israel's claim to a covenant with a redemptive self-revealing God is rendered fraudulent.

Even the language used by the kabbalists to express the relationship between the *Sefirot* and *Ein Sof* resembles the language employed within the stream of Nicene orthodoxy. "The kabbalists insisted that Ein Sof and the sefirot formed a unity 'like a flame joined to a coal.' 'It is they and they are It.'"<sup>3</sup> This language distinguishes both *Kabbalah* and Nicene orthodoxy from Neo-Platonic thought, in which each stage of emanation involves a gradation in the hierarchy of being, and in which everything below the ineffable "One" occupies a lower ontological status in that hierarchy.

The hidden God in the aspect of *Ein-Sof* and the God manifested in the emanation of *Sefirot* are one and the same, viewed from two different angles. There is therefore a clear distinction between the stages of emanation in the neoplatonic systems, which are not conceived as processes within the Godhead, and the kabbalistic approach.<sup>4</sup>

For both the Christian and the Jewish traditions, Greek philosophy challenged the biblical presentation of the God of Israel and the living faith of the communities who worshipped that God. Nicene orthodoxy and Jewish mysticism responded by drawing insights and terminology from the challenging philosophical systems and employing them within a new framework provided by Scripture and the tradition of the worshipping community. The philosophical terminology of *ousia* and emanation now served faithful testimony to the infinite transcendent God who acts within the world to establish a covenant relationship with a people, a relationship in which this God is genuinely known.

## Conclusion

Both Nicene orthodoxy and *Kabbalah* accept the philosophical acknowledgement of God as infinite, transcendent, invisible, and incomprehensible. But they also reject philosophical interpretations which negate the reality of God's involvement with and in the world, and which so separate God from creation as to render God utterly unknowable. They both accomplish this correction of the philosophical currents in their own religious traditions by distinguishing between God the Father and God the Son, or between *Ein Sof* and the *Sefirot*, while simultaneously asserting their inseparable unity.

Thus, what is at stake here is not an articulation of doctrinal truth that has no bearing on our lives. We are not debating the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin. Instead, we are seeking to bear verbal witness to the reality of a redemptive encounter with the living God in a way that does justice to the authenticity of that encounter and which effectively invites others to share in it. This is what it means for us to confess the deity of Yeshua.

The parallel between Nicene orthodoxy and the kabbalistic treatment of the relationship between *Ein Sof* and the *sefirot* can also assist us in articulating our own understanding of Yeshua's deity in a manner that draws upon traditional Jewish wisdom. Our mission as Messianic Jews summons us to challenge the negative boundaries erected by both the Jewish and Christian communities in relation to one another, but that challenge can and should draw from the resources of the very communities that put those boundaries in place.

## ENDNOTES

1. Saadia Gaon, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, II:10 (Rosenblatt, 121).
2. Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 154-55.
3. Daniel Matt, *Zohar* (Ramsey NJ: Paulist, 1983), 33.
4. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 98.